DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 105 509 CS 202 038

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TITLE Strategies for Teaching Sophisticated Literature to "Unsophisticated" Students.
PUB DATE Nov 74
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (64th, New Orleans, November 28-30, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Adult Students; *College Students; *English Programs; Higher Education; *Literature Programs; Part Time Students; *Teaching Methods; *Teaching Models

ABSTRACT

This paper offers six strategies for teaching literature to unsophisticated students. Unsophisticated students are defined as adult and other part-time learners, as well as full-time students, who are less academically qualified than students in previous years. Strategy one suggests that teachers directly confront difficult literature and help students to understand deliberately chaotic and alienating contemporary fiction. Strategy two suggests that teachers organize literature courses thematically and teach within defined parameters. Strategy three suggests that teachers encourage students to read a quantity of books rather than to analyze each book. Strategy four suggests that teachers provide a specific reading guide for students, emphasizing important areas of study. Strategy five suggests encouraging students to work hard in order to gain confidence in their abilities. Strategy six suggests encouraging student response as a means of instigating discussion and interest in the classroom. (TS)

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STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING SOPHISTICATED LITERATURE TO "UNSOPHISTICATED" STUDENTS

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A Paper Prepared for Presentation at the 1974 Meeting of
The National Council of Teachers of English
27 November 1974

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I would like to begin by reading two front-page headlines from The Chronicle of Higher Education:[1]

"Drop in Aptitude-Test Scores Continues for Seventh Year."

"Student Focus on Practicality Hits Humanities."

These two headlines suggest the climate in which college teachers work today. On the one hand, as a prominent executive of the American Associaton for Higher Education said at the 1973 AAHE meeting, "A group of young people we used to dismiss as 'not college material' are now walking through the open doors of colleges, and they constitute a growing proportion of the college population. . . . they are students who by definition are not prepared to do college work."[2] On the other hand, in the article that followed the second headline, a respected education reporter and Senior Editor of The Chronicle of Higher Education identified "the most notable trend among college students" as the focus on practicality that is leading students away from literature and other humanities courses and toward areas that seem more directly related to future jobs.

Such phenomena are significant to literature teachers because, at all but a few selective institutions, they bring into our classes students who--by

their reading abilities, pragmatic orientations, or general lack of cultural-intellectual sophistication are ill-prepared to respond meaningfully to much of the literature that, traditionally, is taught in college English courses. These students may resemble a freshman economics major who stated that he had been so confused by the switchings from the shot-up B-25, to the naked nurse, to Milo Minderbinder's schemings in the film of Catch-22 that he literally could not distinguish between flash-back, fantasy, and ongoing action. Or they may be like the senior English major who reacted this way to one of Beckett's novels:

> Reading Molloy was a complete waste. Any book that makes the reader dread reading has defeated its purpose. The story is as Molloy says of his life: "something over, a joke which still goes on . . . and is there any tense for that." Substitute sense for tense and you have an apt comment on the book. Beckett has innovated so much that you cannot see any meaning behind his techniques.

When I speak of such students as "unsophisticated," I run the risk of seeming elitist or condescending. However, I am only trying to be descriptive and realistic. For it is a widely-discussed fact that "postsecondary education" (a term that, rather prophetically, is replacing "higher education") is serving a new type of student. The "typical" college student--upper-middle class, 18-22 years old, academically gifted--is being replaced by adults and other part-time learners, and by full-time students who are less academically qualified than in the past, who desire chiefly occupational training, who are more attracted to physical and interpersonal activities than to theoretical discussions and abstract thinking. K. Patricia Cross, the Educational Testing Service psychologist who more or less discovered this new student in her 1971 book, Beyond the Open Door, has stated what many of us have felt in our classes: that such students pose challenges to the form, content, and methods of the

traditional college program.[3] In an ETS pamphlet, Serving the New Clientele for Postsecondary Education, Gross makes it clear that the students of whom she writes are different. For example, she writes this:

> Research shows that as a group these New Students differ in consistent and significant ways from the students that higher education has served in the past. They differ in interests, abilities, and expectations from traditional college students . . . . Many are trying to tell us that, while they want the credentials and stamp of approval of traditional education, they don't necessarily want the type of education that we have been offering for 100 years to traditional college students. (p. 7)

In literature classes, such differences reveal themselves in attitudes, interests, motivations, and expectations. Such students enter a contemporary fiction class, to use just one example, assuming that a story is an interesting progression of events related by a strong narrator and organized along clear chronological lines. They think that the inner thoughts of characters must always be indicated by such clear marks of reportage as "he thought." And they assume that the external setting of a story is so much more important than its psychic landscape that descriptions of objects just have to be "real" rather than parts of a character's fantasies. Innovative twentieth-century fiction, of course does not conform to these assumptions about plot, narrator, time-frame, or distinctions between inner and outer reality. Obvious in Woolf and Joyce, this fact is even clearer today, when many authors seem to share the esthetic implied in Robert Sukenick's "The Death of the Novel" and Other Stories: "now no one knows the plot and . . . there's no guarantee as to the authenticity of the received version. Time is reduced to . . . the content of a series of discontinuous moments. . . . Reality is, simply, our experience, and objectivity is, of course, an illusion."[4]

The students of whom I am writing, then, lack experience with the kind of literature college professors usually teach; they may lack the reading skills required to grapple with this literature; they are uninclined toward abstract discussions and prolonged literary analysis; and they are not especially motivated to work harder to compensate for these other limitations. This makes them unsophisticated literature students--though in areas in which they have more experience, skill, and motivation, they are not at all unsophisticated. Nor are they stupid, insensitive people, in spite of the dullness and lack of sensitivity they may show toward the literature we teach--and the way we teach it. These students are worth teaching, and they have considerable potential for responding meaningfully to complex, sophisticated literature. But their motivations and prior experiences with literature require that college teacehers modify their approaches to literary study in order to help them understand and appreciate literature more fully. K. Patricia Cross suggests something like this in the following statement: "The new learners . . . sometimes look unsophisticated to us, and we are arrogant enough to think that when they understand our academic traditions, they will value what we value. But I think the handwriting is on the wall," Cross goes on; "we are the ones who need to examine our attitude about education" (New Clientele, p. 9).

Such an examination is most important for teachers who prepared to teach by taking English majors and advanced degrees; who were conditioned by graduate school to think of teaching as sharing a seminar room with a group of intellectuals and clouds of pipe smoke; and for whom professional growth and in-service training may center around the writing of scholarly critical papers. And such an examination has led me to try the different strategies that I will now suggest for teaching complex works of literature to the students that I have called "unsophisticated."

Strategy One: Run At Strength

It is a cliche of sportscasters and arm-chair quarterbacks that, to beat a strong opponent, a coach should attack its strongest points so that, beating them, he demonstrates to both teams that they can be victorious. Similarly, the college teacher working with difficult literature and unsophisticated students should not run away from difficult critical problems, or deny that there are incredibly difficult aspects of a work; and they should not over-simplify to such an extent that students sense condescension. Unsophisticated students, remember, are not stupid, and they can only resent teacher attitudes that disparage their attempts to study literature. So the teacher should treat the students as adults, the literature as a worthy opponent, and, together, teacher and students should attack whatever problems need to be attacked.

I have found it useful to tell the class when we are getting into a particularly thorny thicket, and to admit the befuddlement I felt with the problem until after I had read the work several times with critical footnotes. And I have also found it useful to organize courses or units around exactly those things that I expect to be hardest for the students--to attack my opponent at its strongest points, that is, to show the class that we can win. In contemporary fiction, I have found that technical things often are the most confusing for students. So I once organized an entire course so that I could treat fictional techniques, not as abstract terms, but as meaningful parts of the course's main content, and so that I could help students cope with the intellectual and emotional challenges posed by the innovative use of technique. My goal here was to bring unsophisticated readers to a point where they could see how deliberate technical alienation and the artistic attempt to reflect absurdity work in fiction, and to get them to show some tolerance for deliberately chaotic and alienating contemporary fiction.

Of course, it is one thing to admit the difficulty of a work and to lead a class directly into confrontation with the difficulty, and it is quite another thing to use teaching techniques that force students into single combat, or that uncover critical difficulties too subtle for the non-specialist. The kind of teaching we learned in graduate school may do just these things. And a large part of our examination of attitudes about education involves altering the methods with which we address the difficult works we teach. The teacher does not want to treat the student as a stupid person, but neither can he pretend that the unsophisticated student is a future literature Ph.D. The teacher, that is, needs to make some accomodations in how he teaches. And it is toward this accomodation that I have found the next strategy quite useful.

Strategy Two: Focus Your Teaching

A "focused" literature course is one with fairly defined parameters and a thematic center around which it is organized. A semester survey of American literature is not focused, but neither is an overview of American naturalism or American humor. All of these courses share an unfocused breadth; they all purport to survey or otherwise "cover" the area indicated by the title. But a focused course has a thematic core on which the attention of the students and the teacher are focused. The course may teach a great deal more than the theme, but it does so by relating material to the focus-theme.

In this year's Classroom Practices in Teaching English, I describe a modern fiction course which I focused around an analogy between fiction writing and photography. In this analogy, plot and setting formed the background; characterization placed figures in the picture; point of view allowed various kinds of portrait study; and innovative handling of fictional techniques created various special effects.[5] The analogy, admittedly, was simplistic, and it did not at all exhaust the material that the course dealt with. But it provided a framework--a sort of academic hat rack which helped the students keep information, ideas, and other literary haberdashery organized during the term.

Another time, I focused a course around the idea that literature is a key that can unlock culture. We examined Birds of America to discover what we needed to know about art, music, and philosophy in order to understand McCarthy's book. Then we turned to comments that William Barrett makes about the spirit of modern culture in Irrational Man, and for the rest of the course we discussed works, ranging from The Oresteia to Hamlet to Waiting for Godot, in order to determine whether Barrett's generalizations were valid.

In neither of these courses did I feel that I really "covered" my material; but in each I knew that students not accustomed to reading complex literature had grown in their understanding of significant ideas and techniques, and in their ability to read such literature for themselves. The focused quality of the courses helped, by providing a structure and some limitations within which students felt more comfortable. But the focus alone did not cause the success of the courses. Other strategies did. And one of the key strategies was this one:

Strategy Three: Read More, Not Deeper

Students who prefer watching television to reading, who value physical activity and interpersonal relationships more than abstract reasoning, and who test the value of their studies against short-term occupational values often become restless or even hostile during extended literary analysis. My experience with such students is that they do not necessarilly resist reading difficult material, provided that they receive useful guidance, but that they do resist the kind of abstraction and analysis that come with spending five class sessions on one novel. So my approach is to read more works, to spend less time on each one, and to resist the temptations to analyze each work from every possible angle and to draw every nuance of meaning from it.

I mentioned just now that unsophisticated students need useful guidance as they read. Providing this guidance is the fourth strategy:

Strategy Four: Structure the Reading Assignments

Students without much sense of the literary traditions surrounding the works they read face a difficult task when they turn to a complex work. Their puzzlement over techniques or allusions or historical settings can easily turn to disgust and hostility unless the teacher helps them before they start to read. The central framework within a focused course helps to do this. In addition, I have found it useful to use rather specific Reading Report forms for almost all the readings in my courses. These are not study guides as I have usually seen them used. They do not ask students to formulate a short, complete answer to a few questions. Instead they outline areas on which I want students to take notes while they read. Reading Reports are preparation for class discussion, in the sense that they let the student record page numbers and brief notes in categories that I know will be useful when we begin discussing the work. About two weeks ago, for instance, I used such a Reading Report for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. Earlier in the term, we had read Waiting for Godot; we had just finished discussing Hamlet; and now we came to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at the very end of a course examining the artistic and intellectual qualities of modern culture. So I asked students to complete a Reading Report of four questions:

1. Jot down the page numbers of sections that seem original to Stoppard's play; and jot down pages of sections that follow Hamlet very closely.
2. Look for passages that show that Stoppard has altered the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. For each passage, make a note about how he has changed them.
3. Record page numbers on which you find things that remind you of Waiting for Godot.
4. Find things in the play that seem to show a "modern" spirit or tone.

The guidance of such a Reading Report guarantees close reading. The purpose of such reading is to prepare students for class discussion that is

spirited, thorough, and analytic. But it results in such discussion only if the teacher resists the temptation to deliver dazzling critical performances that convey as much to students about their inability as about the teacher's ability to interpret literature. And so the next strategy:

Strategy Five: Make the Students Do the Work

Students who are not especially comfortable with analytic reading, it seems to me, need as much as anything else to gain confidence in their own abilities. And this growth of confidence cannot come from passively listening to a lecture, no matter how good it is. It comes by hearing a classmate make a perceptive comment and from realizing, "Oh yea, a student can do that." And it comes from offering a tentative judgment, seeing others smile and nod, and hearing the pick up the comment and use it as a springboard to a related point. So, teachers working with unsophisticated students must try whatever instructional tricks they know to foster genuine discussion--with give-and-take between students, and not merely student responses to the prods of specific questions. Reading Reports help. Armed with an arsenel of notes and page numbers, students respond to opening questions with more confidence and in a more substantial way than they can when they are relying on shaky memories of vague impressions they felt when they were reading the night before.

Of course, having a lot of pertinent page numbers and brief notes does not mean that a student will want to start commenting about a work of literature. In fact, unsophisticated students seldom want to start commenting about abstract, intellectual points. And to overcome this problem is the goal of the final strategy:

Strategy Six: Stimulate Student Responses

About two years ago, Richard Larson wrote these words about process-centered literature teaching:

> . . . what counts for many teachers today is what happens as the student interacts with the literary text, how he feels about the text,

> what it means to him, how and why it comes to mean those things. It matters much less . . . that the student comes up with . . . acceptable insights based on the following of different approaches than that he have an experience of the work that is meaningful to him and that he talk about that experience honestly and fairly, sharing it, perhaps, with other students in discussion. [6]

This, it seems to me, is a good starting point for any class of unsophisticated students. For from this sharing of responses and meanings can come a flow of discussion, and without the discussion it is unlikely that there can be much growth in student understanding or in student confidence.

So have students act out a key scene from a play, and see what kind of discussion starts once students have stood up and responded in hammy delivery and awkward gestures. Ask students to find some character with which they most identify, and then invite people to share their choices and talk about the differences. Ask students what the worst part of a book was, or what the hardest thing about the day's reading is--and move later from the negative responses into other territory. But get students to respond. And once they have started responding, work to keep them talking meaningfully, and gradually turn them toward the material they have collected on their Reading Reports and toward the "focused" theme of the course.

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NOTES

[1]The Chronicle of Higher Education, 13 Dec. 1973, p. 1, and 4 Feb. 1974, p. 1.

[2]K. Patricia Cross, "New Students in the New World of Postsecondary Education." Paper presented at the AAHE National Conference on Higher Education, 13 March 1973, p. 2.

[3]Serving the New Clientele for Postsecondary Education (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 1973), pp. 3-4.

[4]"The Death of the Novel" and Other Stories (New York: Dial Press, 1969), p. 41.

[5]"Sophisticated Fiction and Unsophisticated Students," Re-Vision: Classroom Practices in Teaching English, 1974-1975, ed. Allen Berger and Blanche Smith (Urbana: NCTE, 1974), pp. 97-101.

[6]"Process or Product: The Evaluation of Teaching or the Evaluation of Learning," ADE Bulletin, No. 35, Dec. 1972, p. 54.